

DOWNTIME

WHAT?

**HOW TO BE
HEARD IN THE
NEW ERA OF MASKS
AND ZOOM**



BY
CHRISTINA
AUSTIN

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eaches appear ripe. Peaches appear ripe. Peaches appear ripe.

D'Anna Farrar has repeated that phrase countless times in recent months, a unique period in human evolution when the art of enunciation has become more crucial than maybe ever before. A confluence of factors has made vocal integrity a modern survival imperative, and the 33-year-old senior advertising strategist in Lookout Mountain, Georgia, is at the center of them all—which is why she finds herself reciting rhymes in her spare time.

Like many women her age who have been chastised for uptalk and vocal fry, Farrar never felt confident speaking in a professional setting. "I've never liked my voice, and felt insecure about it," she says. "I didn't sound authoritative or have gravitas." When the pandemic forced her to begin communicating on camera without the aid of body language or through a mask that muffled her voice even more, what had been uncomfortable before became unbearable. At the end of each day, both her vocals and emotions were raspy and fatigued.

Farrar is one of many who have used COVID-19 as a catalyst for transformation; she hired a remote

speech coach with whom she worked biweekly, pronouncing pithy phrases and poems. In between the meetings, she'd listen to the hour-and-a-half recordings of herself. Vocal instructors of all varieties have reported an uptick in inquiries, and many find online sessions have made it easier to hear and see their clients clearly. At the same time, a host of new speech-recognition technologies, including apps and smart watches, are now offering real-time feedback and instruction. Fitness trackers are monitoring voice tone as a component of well-being, while others flag distracting fillers, like "um" or "so." There are even hypnotherapy apps to overcome the fear of public speaking.

COVID has been a double-edged sword when it comes to communicating. Facial expressions, the primary way people exhibit and detect emotion, become obscured behind a mask and six feet of distance, making body language even more important. While studies show that masks don't significantly alter the voice, people often need to speak louder—and changing the tone can change a whole conversation. (Experts advise sharpening enunciation instead of raising volume.) On screens that crop out the body, though, it's all about the shoulders up.

Not only are people exasperated by Zoom and masks and colleagues asking "What?" a million times, but as teams become truly remote, forward-looking leaders realize diction and cross-cultural communication will become even more crucial to engaging with non-native speakers. "The best speakers adapt their voices to their listeners, context, and culture," Rosario Signorello told reporters of his postdoctoral research at UCLA on the acoustics of charisma and psychology of perception.

Signorello's research shows that low pitches are, unsurprisingly, associated with dominance. The most commanding orators, though, employ a spectrum of notes and frequencies. Other studies have found that baritone CEOs head up larger firms, make more money, and last longer on the job. Analyzing corporate earnings calls, a team at Duke University even identified certain vocal traits correlated to financial misreporting, another indicator of the extent to which voice conveys character and culture.

While spoken word may be one of the most influential instruments of communication, speech command isn't something that's generally taught to children, at least not with much intention. Kids learn the meaning of words, but not how to use

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harmonics to tell a complete story. Instead, young ones imitate their parents until about age 10, when they've developed a speaking pattern that becomes part of the subconscious, says Farrar's coach, Sandra McKnight of Voice Power Studios.

After three months of working with McKnight, Farrar began receiving compliments on her presentations from her boss. Today, she feels more poised. Polished. Ambitious, even. Knowing that she now has the power to project and the stamina to talk for hours empowered the branding creative to pursue a university teaching gig. "It's emotional as much as it is physical," Farrar says, adding that voice is "something everyone can change." //

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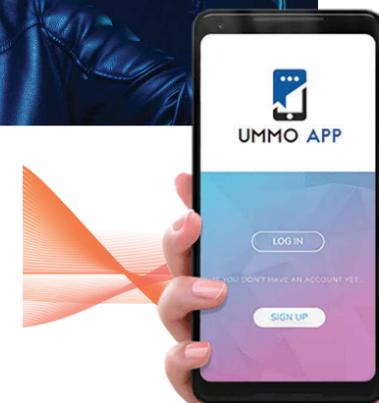
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